ARTnews

Laura Owens's Latest New York Exhibition Is the Season's Buzziest Show for a Reason

BY ALEX GREENBERGER February 24, 2025 11:35am

Installation view of "Laura Owens" at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2025.
PHOTO ANNIK WETTER/©LAURA OWENS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

"Are you a part of the show?" a woman asked a gallery attendant seated at a desk, cocking an eyebrow as she tried to make sense of the situation. That would have been a stupid question just about anywhere else, but the exhibition was by Laura Owens, a painter with a penchant for trickery, and the venue was Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, whose press release for Owens's latest outing offered little in the way of explanation. No, the attendant said, he was not an artwork. Then a telephone near his laptop jittered, as if controlled by an unseen presence. "The desk is, though," he said, flashing a smile.

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His banged-up table—laid with mechanized objects and books hand-made by Owens, who also stuffed its drawers with faux cigarette boxes and written tracts on Surrealism (a text by Marcel Broodthaers personally translated into English by Owens)—is indeed first billed on the checklist for the artist's latest exhibition. Officially titled *Untitled* (2025), the desk mimics the ones where dispassionate gallery assistants conduct their business in view of the public. But here, the desk is the art, and the art melts away into its surroundings.

Owens, as usual, is up to no good, and that's why her work is amazing. The sculptor Rachel Harrison once recalled that seeing Owens's first New York outing, in 1997, at the now-defunct Gavin Brown's Enterprise, showed her that "it was still possible to throw a bomb" using painting. Nearly three decades on, with this extraordinary Matthew Marks exhibition (through April 19), Owens is still tossing grenades.

The best way to experience Owens's explosives is to see them to explode for yourself. (Owens seems to want just that—*Untitled* is placed in front of a big false wall that hides everything else behind it from street view.) If you can't get to the gallery, know that what follows are paintings and installations that adhere to Owens's chicanery, shrewdly blurring the line between art and life, artifice and authenticity.

These are not new subjects for Owens. For decades, she has been making abstractions that are partially painted and partially silkscreened, making it appear as though these works were done partly

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by hand and partly by machine—even though nearly everything here is handmade. She reprises the formula in towering abstractions that line the walls of one big central room at Matthew Marks, and she even adds new flair with one painting that seems to update Cubism for the age of Photoshop, with what appear to be layers of unevenly cut paper piled atop one another. Those papers are, in fact, printed—there are computer-assisted drop shadows, though these too have been hand-painted by Owens—and the pencil scrawls on top of them are likewise digitally created, even though they appear real from afar. According to the gallery's press materials, Owens did use charcoal and graphite somewhere in this untitled piece, but I couldn't tell where.

Works such as that one have always dazzled the eye, nowhere more so than in her effervescent 2017 Whitney Museum survey. But the times have changed since then, and the authority of cold, hard facts has been weakened by years of fake news and Truth Social. To make art that purposefully lies to its viewers right now is arguably not an advisable choice. Good thing Owens knows what she's doing.

I initially found it unsettling that Owens had offered a spot of beauty during an otherwise hideous moment, filling one gallery with a floor-to-ceiling installation that covers every inch of wall space in pops of color. There are pixelated plants and painted trees, their leafy branches formed from moss-green smears thick as cake icing. There are silkscreened golden sections, their patterning vaguely recalling that of a crosshatched gate depicted nearby that just barely contains overflowing peonies. There are bubble-shaped clouds worthy of the Japanese prints that once influenced Vincent van Gogh, and in a claustrophobic side room—also a part of this untitled installation—there's a video in which animatronic crows scheme to obtain Starbucks lattes from generous passersby instead of stale bread.

The crow video made me laugh, and I was awed by the painted elements all around it. But I wondered whether this installation didn't feel a little glib right now, as though Owens were lamely suggesting art as a pretty antidote to trying times. The gallery next door, which is mostly filled with box-like assemblages, proved me wrong.

Think of these works as Owens's take on Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*, the suitcase he made to transport portable versions of his readymades. Owens's *Boîtes* each contain books and are all printed to resemble the abstractions that typically appear on gallery walls. The drawers of the five boxes exhibited here, all dating to 2022, can be pulled open by gallery visitors, who are allowed to thumb through the tomes she has produced. Some are cute and heartwarming: I spent time with one book whose feathery pages contained reproductions of what seemed to be Owens's baby pictures.

Others, however, are disturbing. One brownish box, with drawers whose knobs are formed from sculpted cigarette butts, contains a book on artificial intelligence, its cover featuring a smiling girl holding hands with robots. The book purports to have been published by DARPA, an organization that has been know to provide research to the United States military. As far as I can tell, the publication appears to be a fabrication on Owens's part—no such book exists, according to Google. Likewise, there's a hardcover volume here called *West Wing Reads* that catalogues press releases

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disseminated by Trump, a Presidentially-elected liar, during his first term. The releases are real, but this book has never officially been released, so it's also a convincing fake.

It seems like no coincidence that these boxes are printed with the very same patterns that have appeared in her paintings. If I understand Owens correctly, I think she's saying that her paintings are not always a force of good. Might not her paintings, with their innocent-seeming references to primers and kids' drawings, then contain forms of evil, just as her boxes do? Might not their dense surfaces conceal something dark?

Perhaps it's only inevitable, then, that the show ends on a haunting, moody note. Its final room is another one of those vast painted installations, this one with hazy wisps of blue and pink covering the walls. But this room has something the others don't—a low-pitched hum for a soundtrack. This room offers a confusing parting shot, one made all the more befuddling by its portal, a door whose wood has nearly been stripped of its varnish, possibly by decades of use. What would happen if one treated an Owens painting like this door, sanding away at its glossy veneer to reveal the roughness beneath? The question nagged at me long afterward.

Correction, 2/24/25, 7:45 p.m.: *A previous version of this article misstated which birds figure in a video included in one installation. They are crows, not pigeons.*

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